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News

Tobacco industry memo reveals passive smoking strategy

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A leaked industry memo promises to blow apart the facade that the tobacco industry carries out neutral research into passive smoking. The memo plainly sets out the details of the Philip Morris company's worldwide strategy to "coordinate and pay so many scientists on an international basis to keep the environmental tobacco smoke controversy alive."

The memo, which is dated February 1988 but has only recently come to light, describes a joint meeting in London of representatives from several of the world's major tobacco companies. Written by Dr Sharon Boyse of British American Tobacco, the memo reveals Philip Morris as very particular about the sort of scientist it headhunts. Not for it the scientists at the cutting edge of research into passive smoking; instead, "the consultants should, ideally, be scientists who have no previous association with tobacco companies and who have no previous record on the primary issues." A list of British suggestions is given in the memo.

Although it is hardly surprising to learn that "obvious anti-smokers or those with unsuitable backgrounds are filtered out," the conditions under which the relationships proceed destroy any pretence at scientific neutrality. Potential candidates are first contacted by tobacco industry lawyers and asked oblique questions about their interest in "problems of indoor air quality." If the scientists take the bait, the real agenda on passive smoking is then introduced. The memo then explains that "Philip Morris then expect the group of scientists to cooperate within the confines of decisions taken by Philip Morris scientists to determine the general direction of research, which apparently would then be filtered by lawyers to eliminate areas of sensitivity."

The memo also suggests that once a scientist crosses over to the tobacco industry, the cheques can just keep coming. With regard to a British professor, the memo explains that the British Tobacco Advisory Council "should continue to support him because it could be problematic to withdraw support from a scientist who has been sympathetic to the industry." We learn that Philip Morris was "putting vast amounts of funding into these projects" and that it was seeking support from the other companies.

The memo lists most regions around the world as potential recruiting grounds for scientists. In Australia Philip Morris is one of the companies that supports the Tobacco Institute. In 1994 the institute commissioned Dr Julian Lee, currently New South Wales's president of the Australian Medical Association, to convene a group of eight researchers and statisticians to review the evidence on passive smoking. Their report was to be submitted to an inquiry into passive smoking being undertaken by the National Health and Medical Research Council. It concluded that the evidence against passive smoking was weak.

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/tnhj0001

Funding not disclosed

An Australian Medical Association rule states: "If a doctor has accepted funding from a tobacco company, then it is mandatory that both the amount and the precise source of the funding are detailed in the preamble to any presentation of material developed as a result of the funding." Despite this, the exact slice of the "vast amounts of funding" available was not stated in the report and has not been disclosed since. When asked on the radio, "How much did they pay?" Dr Lee replied vaguely: "Oh it cost a fair bit of money ... but I can't tell you -I don't really know what the total cost was."

The Philip Morris specification that recruited scientists should "have no previous record on the primary issues" bears a remarkable correspondence to the publishing backgrounds of the group that Dr Lee convened. With the exception of one-who later distanced herself from the report-a Medline search revealed that none had anything remotely approaching a serious track record in epidemiology, passive smoking, or any form of tobacco research. Indeed, several had published nothing in any of these fields.

Last year, the Tobacco Institute took the National Health and Medical Research Council to the federal court. Using administrative law, it challenged the process used by the council's working party on passive smoking in considering submissions put to it by the institute and those it had commissioned. Justice Finn found in favour of the Tobacco Institute, and the massive report produced over two years remains in mothballs. Despite expert testimony from Sir Gustav Nossal, former head of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, Justice Finn ruled that the working party had erred in law by deciding to consider only epidemiological research that had been peer reviewed. The council was required to show it had considered equally all material submitted to it, regardless of the quality. As Sir Gustav Nossal had argued was normal practice in science, the working party had instead concentrated on research published in peer reviewed journals.

The court victory has bought the tobacco industry some precious borrowed time in its determination to stave off workplace smoking bans. In 1996 Australians smoked around 28.1 billion cigarettes. Despite population growth, this was 6.5 billion less than in 1989. Concern about passive smoking is contributing to the massive drop in sales that gets worse each year. The report by Dr Lee played a small part in "keeping the controversy alive." Whatever it cost, it was doubtless money well spent. (See p 1572.)

The full text of the memo is at
http://www.gate.net/~jcannon/documents/880217b1.txt

Simon Chapman was a member of the National Health and Medical Research Council's working party on passive smoking.

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